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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Good afternoon, St. Louis. Today is Friday, March 1, 2002.

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This story was published in Metro on Friday, February 22, 2002.

Herculanum pastor is told to leave lead-tainted home

By Chris Carroll
Of The Post-Dispatch

Regional church leaders have told a Herculanum pastor to move out of his lead-contaminated home, and the future of the 87-year-old church next door is in doubt.

The Rev. Paul Latham, 50, said his congregation should leave the Herculanum United Methodist Church building, which is next door to Doe Run Co.'s lead smelter. He said, however, no final decision has been made to abandon the church's Main Street location.

Attendance at church services has dropped to 85 worshippers from an average of 110 as fear has intensified over the extent of lead contamination in Herculanum, he said.

"Keeping a congregation here is not a responsible thing to do," Latham said. "I'd like to be out of here."

The city of 2,800 people about 30 miles south of St. Louis is the site of a large-scale, government cleanup resulting from the operations of Doe Run's 110-year-old lead smelter. Scores of residents say they can't sell their homes and want the government or Doe Run to buy their properties.

The company and environmental officials say the cleanup will make Herculanum safe.

Tests over the years have revealed high lead levels in many of Herculanum's houses, streets and schools. Health data released by the state in January showed 24 percent of the children tested in the city met or exceeded the government's standard for lead



The Rev. Paul Latham watches workers replace lead-contaminated soil in the front yard of his home, which is next door to his Herculanum United Methodist Church. The church sits next door to Doe Run Co.'s lead smelter.

LAURIE SKRIVAN/P-D

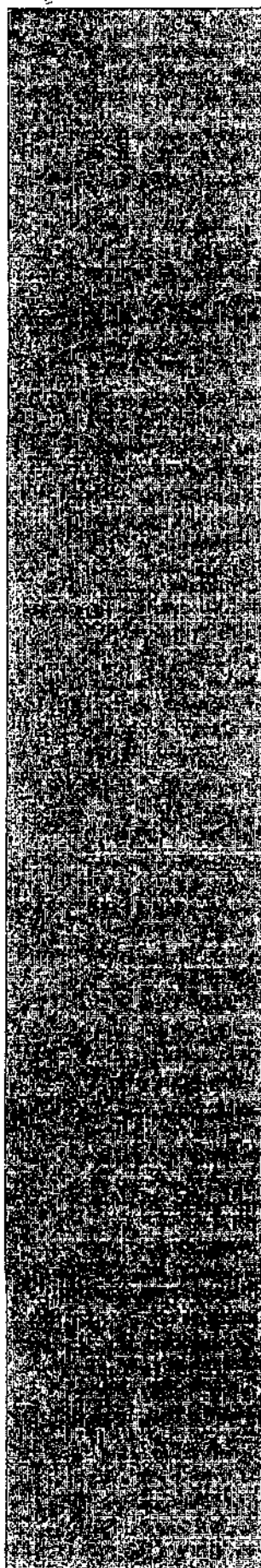
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Church members say they are saddened by the likelihood that the church will leave the city, and some have said they will try to keep the building open.

Bill Stotler, 61, a member of the church for more than 30 years, said the building itself was not important, but the community of worship that has formed over the decades shouldn't be disrupted.

"I don't feel we're in harm's way here," he said. "There are people with more tenure at this church than I have who have appealed to me because they don't want to leave. They don't feel their health is in harm's way, either."

The order for Latham to leave the church-owned parsonage was issued after regional church leaders saw the results of soil tests on his yard. It contained more than 10 times the amount of lead the federal government says is safe for places where children play.

Latham's children are grown, but his 1-year-old granddaughter is frequently at his house.

"There is no reason to have a pastor appointed by the denomination living in a place where it's difficult to host children or grandchildren in good conscience," said Jerrol Boehmer, superintendent of the Gateway Regional District of the United Methodist Church.

Church leaders, including Bishop Ann Brookshire Sherer, resident bishop for the area, will have to decide whether the church should stay open.

Options include closing the building, or leaving the building open and establishing another church for people who wish to leave, sharing the same pastor, he said.

Church members will have the final vote on what to do, Boehmer said.

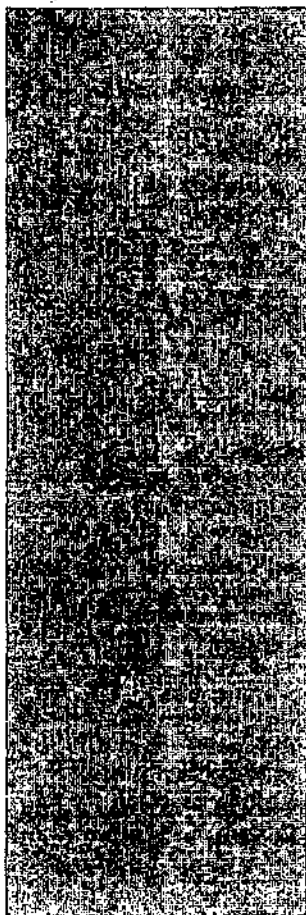
Tests last year revealed toxic dust in the church, including a measurement in the church nursery that showed nearly 10 times the concentration of lead that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has set as a standard for cleanup in Herculanum.

Buildup of lead in children's bodies puts them at risk for reduced intelligence, impaired growth and behavioral disorders. Higher concentrations can harm adults, as well.

Pads covering the pews contained even higher lead levels than the nursery, and dust found in the church attic contained more than 10 percent lead. Arsenic, cadmium and zinc also were detected in the building.

Doe Run contractors recently cleaned the inside of the church, but a local official fears Doe Run's smelter will recontaminate the church.

"I think it would be wise to move the church but keep it near Herculanum," said Erin Juenger, 31, a Festus resident who is chairman of the church's administrative council. "We just have to keep an open mind and accept everybody's opinion in deciding what to do."



A parishioner who lives near the smelter said she understood the fears of lead contamination, especially from people who live outside the city.

"I think our dropping attendance was a big factor in their (church officials) deciding to move, because some people are scared to come here now," said Beth Hudson, 39.

She probably will go to a United Methodist church in Festus if the current congregation moves too far away.

"It's just such a great atmosphere at the church, and it won't be the same in a new place," she said. "I feel like the smelter is just killing Herculaneum. It really breaks my heart."

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